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SUBJECT: DFM EXPRESSES CONCERN OVER KIDNAPPING OF JOURNALIST AND HIS OWN SAFETY

Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury for reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary: On September 13, DFM Mustafa Noman briefed DCM on the recent kidnapping and assault of his close friend, journalist Jamal Amer. Noman also shared his concerns that his perceived support for Amer angered President Saleh, who reportedly encouraged Zindani to publicly attack Noman.

Kidnapped Journalist: Part of a Disturbing Trend?

2. (C) Noman retold the story of Amer's abduction, which was widely published in the local and international media. On August 23, Amer was abducted from his home by armed men in a car bearing a license plate number normally reserved for the Republican Guard, the President's own elite military unit. Amer was taken to a remote location and beaten for alleged fax communications with the US and Kuwaiti Ambassadors, supposedly in an attempt to undermine the Yemeni government. After an interrogation of his involvement with foreign embassies, Amer was returned home four hours later. He reported the abduction to MOI authorities and helped a sketch artist create a detailed sketch of the lead abductor.

3. (C) Noman believed the allegations of contact with the American and Kuwaiti embassies were an attempt to mask Amer's real offense, which was the publishing of several articles accusing high-level government officials of corruption. While Amer's abductors demonstrated a lack of professionalism, continued Noman, by showing their faces and employing rudimentary interrogation tactics, he believes it was unlikely they acted without high-level government support. (Note: Amer is not an isolated case of harassment. In the last several weeks several journalists critical of the government have been arrested or had materials confiscated).

4. (C) Two hours after the abduction, Noman alerted Saleh's office to the incident, after receiving a call from Amer's wife, believing the President would want to know immediately. Instead, Saleh was angry he received a direct call on the issue. According to Noman, the President was already upset with him, believing Noman supported journalists against the government and passed information to Amer. (Note: Saleh recently named Noman Ambassador to India, which the DFM considers a slight as he expected to receive London, Paris or Rome).

Zindani Lashes Out

5. (C) One week after the abduction, Akhbar al Youm (a sensational paper reportedly used by Saleh's supporters to trash his foes) published a statement by Zindani saying that it was against national and Sharia law to act against another Muslim without just cause. "This is interesting" said Noman, considering the accusation stems from a February television interview, where he said Yemen was committed to enforcing the UN Security Resolution targeting Zindani's assets. Noman questioned why Zindani would launch an attack on a seven month old interview, especially after the Foreign Minister and Prime Minister immediately made public statements contradicting him, saying the ROYG would not support freezing Zindani's assets without concrete evidence. The only logical reason, Noman asserted, is that the President wanted to intimidate him over his support for other journalists.

6. (C) On September 8, Noman met Zindani to discuss the issue privately. During the meeting, Zindani admitted that Saleh encouraged him to publish a statement against Noman, based on the February interview. Noman assured Zindani that his comments had been misconstrued and that he would not support freezing Zindani's assets without clear proof. Zindani considered the issue settled and promised to publish a clarification to ensure that his supporters did not consider the original statement to be a fatwa against Noman.

Comment

17. (C) Noman, a well-known advocate for political and economic reform, was still visibly shaken from the run-in with Zindani. Noman fears that any young supporter of Zindani could take it upon himself to avenge his master for the perceived slight from Noman. He plans to travel to Cairo soon, presumably to await the publishing of Zindani's clarification that Noman did not violate Sharia law. Already frustrated with the government in general, Noman admitted he was actively pursuing a private UN position.

18. (C) The abduction of Amer and Saleh's possible collusion with Zindani to attack a member of his own government highlights several disturbing trends. While the mastermind of the kidnapping is unknown, it appears to be part of an organized campaign to intimidate the press with at least the tacit approval of government officials. The kidnapping follows an increasing number of articles criticizing Saleh and numerous other high-level officials for corruption. Yemeni authorities possess the license plate number and a detailed sketch of one of the abductors. If the ROYG is serious about finding those responsible, it could do so easily. To date, however, no suspects have been detained or questioned.

19. (C) Further, Saleh's use of Zindani as a tool to intimidate reformers is also of great concern. While Noman himself is no real threat to the regime, his brother currently living in Germany plans to run for president. Neither Saleh's thin skinned reactions to any criticism nor his lashing out at friend and foe alike bode well for transparency and tolerance in the run-up to the 2006 Presidential Election.

Krajeski